

# Clyde Walter Mason

*June 17, 1898 — December 8, 1983*

Clyde Mason was born in Watertown, South Dakota, in 1898. He went to college in Eugene, Oregon, and received an A.B. degree in chemistry from the University of Oregon in 1919. He stayed on there for a year of graduate study but in 1920 seized an opportunity to combine his interest in chemistry with his love of microscopes and came to Cornell as a Ph.D. candidate under Professor Emile M. Chamot, with a major in chemical microscopy. Microscopy was not his only love, however, for during his first year at Cornell he met and married Elizabeth M. Peterson. For the next sixty-three years Ithaca and Cornell were their home.

In 1924 he received his doctorate and was appointed instructor in chemistry at an annual salary of \$1,200. He was made an assistant professor in 1927 and a professor in 1933. With his colleague and former teacher E. M. Chamot he published the first edition of the classic *Handbook of Chemical Microscopy* in 1930-31. When Olin Hall was completed in 1942, providing new facilities for teaching and research in microscopy, Clyde moved out of Baker Laboratory and became professor of chemical microscopy and metallography in the School of Chemical Engineering. In 1958 he was named the Emile M. Chamot Professor of Chemical Microscopy. He retired from teaching in 1966 but continued working at Olin Hall until a few days before he died. His revised fourth edition of volume 1 of the *Handbook* was published in 1983, when he was eighty-four.

This brief catalog of events, however, does little to convey a sense of his remarkable character. His sometimes prickly independence and self-sufficiency reflected his western origin. He was devoted to learning and to truth, constantly studying, criticizing, and writing with uncompromisingly high standards. His vast knowledge, always up-to-date, made him a true authority in his field. He knew a great many other things, too—most unexpected things. “Ask Clyde,” one would say when a seemingly impossible question arose. “He’ll know.” And he nearly always did.

His great love, however, was teaching. “I knew from the beginning that I was not a great lecturer,” he said, “so I concentrated on becoming a good teacher. I particularly liked the beginner or struggler.” This meant that he liked just about everybody, for all the students in his classes did a lot of struggling. He expected budding engineers to share his passion for accuracy and independent observation. “Don’t tell me what the book says,” he would tell the eye-weary student bent over a microscope. “Tell me what *you* see.” He abhorred the parroting of undigested information. “Don’t take notes on my lecture,” he would say. “Listen to it—*think* about it.” Shocked and dismayed,

most students would take notes anyway, for they had never before been expected to think about lecture material during class. His examinations were equally searching, and he was a tough grader. Nonetheless, he was held in high esteem by his students and was sensitive to their opinions. He especially appreciated the Christmas gift from one of the classes of some notepads inscribed "From the little world of C. W. Mason."

Clyde's world was anything but little. He wrote some forty technical articles on microscopy applied to a wide range of subjects. A series of lectures he presented to the American Society for Metals was published by that society in 1947 as a book entitled *Introductory Physical Metallurgy*. He was a consultant to several industrial firms, the Army Chemical Corps, and the Office of Scientific Research and Development. He was the founder and first chairman of the Division of Analytical and Microchemistry of the American Chemical Society; he was a fellow of the New York Microscopical Society and an active member of several other technical societies. He had a keen interest in libraries, served on library committees, and taught a course in library use. For many years he served on the University Committee on Music.

During the 1960s he drove a 1930 Model A Ford that he had lovingly restored to "historic vehicle" quality; he estimated that he spent three thousand hours on the project. He and his wife loved to dance, and he organized frequent dances for the Alpha Chi Sigma fraternity, of which he was faculty adviser. He was an excellent figure skater and an early member of the Cornell Figure Skating Club. Here he revealed his extreme fondness for children, a characteristic known only to his closest associates. He somehow arranged to be at Lynah Rink whenever he suspected that a chemical engineering faculty child would be at a public skating session. Parents were summarily dismissed; he made sure that blades were properly sharpened, that boots were properly laced, and that the child was not rigidly supported while learning to "use the edges." At age seventy he still had the patience to teach a four-year-old to skate.

Formal honors came to him rather late in life. In 1969 he was cited by the New York Microscopical Society for his contributions, and in 1981 an alumnus of the Class of 1956 established an engineering scholarship in his name. Currently three Master of Engineering degree students are designated as Mason Scholars.

For many years Clyde lived in Cayuga Heights with his wife and two children, George and Phoebe, all of whom survived him. Independent as always, Clyde refused outside assistance, even when, near the end of his days, he was caring for his increasingly incapacitated wife. "We'll manage," he would say. But the day finally came when even he could manage no longer.

Clyde was a gifted, exacting, complex individual. He was a distinguished gentleman, reserved yet friendly; outwardly brusque yet sensitive and unfailingly generous; demanding of the students yet deeply concerned with their welfare; a recognized authority of enormous learning, yet one who often apologized for his lack of knowledge. There was no pretense in him.

Above all he was a devoted teacher who well understood the learning process and the limitations of our educational system, who sought to awaken in his students a sense of independent thought and critical judgment. Cornell has lost a dedicated servant. It is comforting that he lived to see the establishment of the Mason Engineering Scholarship that will perpetuate his memory.

*Robert L. Von Berg, Charles C. Winding, Julian C. Smith*