

W. Donald Cooke

May 15, 1918 — September 20, 2007

Cornell Professor Emeritus W. Donald Cooke, 89, died peacefully at home on September 20, 2007. Don, as all knew him, had a remarkable Cornell career that covered the full academic gamut of teaching, research and administration.

Don was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on May 15, 1918. He joined Cornell in 1951 and advanced quickly through the ranks. When he came to Cornell, he led the effort to modernize analytical chemistry with spectroscopic, electrochemical, and chromatographic techniques. His productive 15 years of research yielded more than 35 publications, but during this time, he became Associate Dean of Arts and Sciences. He then was Dean of the Graduate School for a decade, and finally spent 15 years as Vice President for Research and Advanced Studies. He was an active member of the Cornell University Senate, Acting Provost, Acting Chairman of the Chemistry Department, and Director of the Occupational Health and Safety Program during its formative years. During all this, he continued an active teaching role, even past his retirement in 1987. Outside of Cornell, Don served on boards at several institutes and universities.

Don's early childhood was reasonably comfortable, but it fell apart with the 1929-1939 Depression. At one point, his extended family of eight lived day-to-day off the waitress tips of his sister, the only one with a job. Although Don has described himself as a lackadaisical student, St. Joseph's College saw enough promise to offer him deferred tuition and a job to pay for his study materials. After he graduated in 1940, he stayed on a year to work off his tuition and then spent a year at the Hanshaw Chemical Company as an analytical chemist. He joined the U.S. Army Air Force as a Private and was sent to MIT for a year to study Meteorology. After serving three years in the European Theater, he was discharged with the rank of Major. He served at General Eisenhower's headquarters and helped with tactical weather forecasts including the Normandy D-Day invasion.

Don was a highly skilled poker player and on the return trip home he made enough money to afford a diamond ring and get married to his childhood sweetheart, June. His love of poker continued throughout his career and he played several games a month that continued until a few weeks before his death. Don founded the Cayuga Poker Society, and beginning in 1992, he published a monthly newsletter that in addition to poker announcements included unusual stories about everything from sports to politics. He was fascinated by stories about probabilities.

After his marriage in 1946, he entered graduate school at the University of Pennsylvania, where he received his M.S. degree in 1948 and his Ph.D. degree in 1949. He then studied at Princeton University with Professor N.H. Furman for one year as a National Research Council Postdoctoral Fellow and another year as a Eugene Higgins Fellow. Up until WWII, almost all of Analytical Chemistry used “gravimetric” and “volumetric” techniques, weighing a precipitate or titrating solution. Furman was a pioneer in the new instrumentation revolution, such as with “potentiometric” titrations, but Don took a far broader view at Cornell. His research exploited the analytical potential of new methods then used almost entirely in industry such as nuclear magnetic resonance, infrared, atomic absorption, and flame spectroscopy, and polarography and gas chromatography. This revolution was so complete by the mid-60s that several other major Chemistry Departments closed their Analytical Chemistry sections.

A QuickTime video, “Conversation with W. Donald Cooke,” in which Don reflects on his youth and later experiences can be viewed at <http://ecommons.library.cornell.edu/handle/1813/3770>.

Don’s extraordinary life experiences only hint at his character. He is remembered for his integrity, his genuine humility, and his ability to understand and respect the viewpoints of others from all walks of life. Not surprisingly, Don had a special gift with people. During the turbulent student unrest in the 1960s and 1970s, he negotiated with student leaders, and despite being on opposite sides, he afforded them the same respect and, indeed, remained in contact with several of them in later years.

After the death of Don’s beloved wife, June, to whom he was married for 60 years, his health faded rapidly. His brother, Edward; two daughters, Catherine and Ann; four sons, W.D. Cooke, Jr., Peter, Christopher and Timothy; and nine grandchildren survive him.

All who knew Don will miss him.

Fred McLafferty, Chairperson; Ben Widom, Charles Wilcox