

Melvin L. Nichols

November 30, 1894 — March 29, 1981

Melvin L. “Pete” Nichols, emeritus professor of chemistry, who died March 29, 1981, at the age of eighty-six, enjoyed a career that almost perfectly characterizes a true-blue Cornellian. He was, in fact, a member of that very small group of our faculty that had been personally acquainted with every Cornell president. As Melvin Nichols, he left his home town of Dayton, Ohio, in 1914 to enter Cornell as a freshman. He remained in Ithaca, known to his many friends as Pete, until 1978, when, in failing health, he moved to California to be close to his only daughter, Sally. After receiving his Bachelor of Chemistry degree in 1918, he was appointed an instructor in chemistry at Cornell and simultaneously embarked on a graduate study program under Professor Orndorf, majoring in organic chemistry. He was awarded a Doctor of Philosophy degree in 1922 and was promptly appointed assistant professor in chemistry. He remained on the chemistry faculty until his retirement in 1962.

Nichols’s field of teaching and research was analytical chemistry, and for many years he was unofficial head of the analytical teaching group of the Chemistry Department. He wrote two textbooks on analytical chemistry, *Gas Analysis*, coauthored with L. M. Dennis, and *Laboratory Manual of Analytical Chemistry*. In 1950 Nichols agreed to become executive director of Cornell’s Chemistry Department, a new position which involved supervision of the support facilities and the nonacademic staff of what had become a large and complex establishment. He held this position until his retirement in 1962.

The forty-eight years of Pete Nichols’s life as a student and teacher at Cornell were years of great change for Cornell chemistry. The science itself became more physical and more theoretical. Applied fields such as agricultural chemistry, sanitary chemistry, and chemical microscopy, which had once been central at Cornell, were spun off or phased out. Industrial chemistry was transformed into chemical engineering and moved into the College of Engineering for its separate and independent development. There was a disastrous fire in 1916 which destroyed Morse Hall, the chemistry building; fortunately, a splendid new Baker Laboratory building opened in 1922. That chemistry at Cornell survived these changes and indeed grew stronger and more effective over the years was due in large measure to the successful adjustments and continuing contributions of Pete Nichols and other faculty members of his generation. Cornell is in their debt.

In 1926 Nichols married Mary Bancroft, the attractive and lively-minded daughter of one of Cornell’s eminent chemistry professors, Wilder D. Bancroft. When newcomers to Cornell first learned of this marriage, they were

prone to mutter something about “marrying the boss’s daughter,” and were chagrined to learn that the true situation had been almost the exact opposite. Nichols was a coworker and protégé of the other strong-willed Cornell chemist of the time, L. M. Dennis, and Dennis and Bancroft had a long-established and well developed dislike of each other. Hence, to Dennis, a Nichols involvement with a Bancroft was akin to joining up with the enemy. It is a tribute to his tact and his persistence that Pete Nichols rode out the storm and kept his Cornell position.

Mary Nichols died suddenly in 1967, and Pete Nichols lived on alone in Ithaca, actively involved with his wide circle of friends. He will be missed by his Ithaca friends and colleagues as well as by the hundreds of Cornell students that he taught.

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