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Neckers, James W Oral History Interview: Science Professors at Hope College

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Interview with Dr. James W. Neckers, '23 (Impromptu, recorded in Maas Center)
Interviewed by Brian Williams
June 19, 1987

BW: I'm a student here, a senior, and this summer I'm researching the history of the sciences and the chemistry department.

JN: Oh, I see, a summer project.

BW: Part of it is supposed to be an oral history interview. I just need any general comments you have, what you remember about the science department, the faculty, any of the buildings, where it was housed, and things you knew before you came here.

JN: I came as a fresh, country boy out of western New York, Clymer, New York, out here, in 1919. As I said, a lot of returning veterans too, from World War I, and I was too young to get in on that. So I came out here because my father had been here before, a proud project of the Dutch Reformed Church. That's a natural consequence of that, to follow up.

BW: Your father was here in [18]93?

JN: Something like that, yes. He didn't actually go to college. He went to the Prep School. I didn't know what I was going to actually concentrate in when I came here. I just sort of thought in the back of my mind, maybe medicine, or banking, or something like that. But then, some way or other I got into chemistry the first year I was here. I was interested chiefly in science, and that's how I got into that. I liked it. I had never had any chemistry before in high school. I had a course in physics and in general science, and biology, but nothing in chemistry. I liked them, so I continued in my sophomore year. Then toward the end of that, Dr. Godfrey called

me to his office one day and said that I had a record that he thought was probably good enough, that if I could keep on the same way, I could go to graduate school. That's the way he promoted graduate school. He also signed me up to be a laboratory assistant (no pay, just the honor) in freshman chemistry. He was the first professor here to really get these students interested in continuing at a higher level.

BW: Van Zyl carried that on, didn't he?

JN: Yes. That has become a tradition for the chemistry department under Godfrey. He had sent out a number of outstanding people such as Wichers, who was in the National Bureau of Sciences of some sort. Yntema, who was head of the chemistry department at St. Louis University. His brother, Ted Yntema, the Yntema family that lived between here and Zeeland, contributed a lot of talent and good reputation for the department.

BW: Was their father here when you were, or did he finish before that?

JN: He had finished before I was here. But I think he had four or five sons. All of them went on to be Ph.D.

BW: He had five sons and one daughter.

JN: Ted Yntema was my laboratory instructor when he was a junior and I was a freshman. So I knew him, and worked later with Leonard who was at St. Louis University, the head of their chemistry department. Then he went from there into industry. So, there were many good people who went on from here, under the guidance of Godfrey, the encouragement, to go on to various schools. That is the way I got started there.

At that time, the chemistry department occupied most of the first floor of Van

Raalte Hall. They had one classroom, and that was the northwest corner. Then down the hall they had a freshman laboratory on the northside. Then on the corner, that would be the northeast corner, the stock room that also served another laboratory which was on the east end of the first floor. Godfrey was in the other corner, the southeast corner, with his office. That opened up into another small laboratory on the south side toward the east end, for advanced work for seniors. At that time, the biochemistry which could be given, was given by Dr. Patterson up in the biology department, because Dr. Godfrey had plenty to do with teaching general chemistry to the freshmen, and during the sophomore year analytical chemistry, both qual and quan, and organic chemistry the junior year. He knew organic chemistry because he was an M.D., and he had to take probably some organic and bio-chemistry to get his M.D. But for some reason or other, he was able to pick out students who went on through their second year and sign them up as lab assistants for junior and senior year, which was an honorary duty, no pay. Students were glad to get that. Then he would make recommendations senior year, and have us make out applications, and so on. He would write letters of recommendation, and told us where to go to get other letters of recommendation, one from Professor Lampen in math. Dr. Godfrey was the only one in chemistry, of course, that could give one. We had to choose one more, as they usually require three letters of recommendation. I applied at Ohio State, Illinois, and some other school. I was accepted at Illinois along with Tom De Vries, class of '23. We both went down there, and we roomed our first year we were there in a rooming house with Jack Wierda, who was class of '21 at Hope, I think. He had

been down there for two years, so he helped to break us in. Tom De Vries wanted to get into physical chemistry because he was a good mathematician. I wasn't. So he went into physical chemistry, and worked in that area and got his Ph. D. at the University of Illinois, joined the staff at Purdue University and spent his whole teaching career there. I didn't know what branch I wanted to get into. Harv Kleinheksel went down a year before, and I got to know him a little better down there. I knew him from Hope, of course. He was in inorganic chemistry working under a Hope graduate, Harry Kremers, who got his bachelor's degree I don't know when. He went on and had gotten his Ph.D., and was on the staff at the University of Illinois in inorganic chemistry. I wanted either organic or inorganic. Because H. C. Kremers knew my background, and that's the way I got into inorganic chemistry.

Well, back to Hope College, besides that, chemistry being in the first floor, biology was on the second floor of the east end, under Dr. Patterson. Physics, I think, was on the third floor under one man. All of these departments were one-man departments. Besides that, Van Raalte Hall was the main and almost the only classroom on the campus. All of the classes were held there except there were some classes held in the upstairs in the Graves building over the chapel, where the offices were. So that all of the academic activities practically were concentrated in Van Raalte Hall. About that time, chapel was every morning, but it was in the stone building; it had both the library and the chapel in it. Then from there, eight o'clock chapel every morning except one. From there we went to classes at eight-twenty over in Van Raalte Hall. Then they had Van Vleck Hall, a men's dormitory, and there was

Voorhees Hall where the women had their dormitory. They had a dining room there, and some of the men students from Van Vleck ate there because they wanted some kind of combination of the two to give a little better training. It was good training because one of the girls was hostess at each table. They distributed the men around so they had at least one man, and tried to do it that way. I applied but never got in there. I got a job at Lokker & Rutgers the first year I was here, in that store, up until Christmas time. We ate at the Boston Restaurant downtown. My wife's father was the owner of the Boston Restaurant. I met and married the boss' daughter, of course. That was the way I met her. She was the class of '23 also. Jeanette Hoffman. In those days, the young gals didn't get married until the man could support the wife, so we didn't get married until I had my Ph.D. In the meantime, she taught high school. She took a major in education, minoring in English and foreign language. At that time, there probably were not more than two dozen faculty members. Dr. Dimment was President. The Dean of Men was Nykerk. They always had sly comments to make because he had an apartment in Voorhees Hall, in the women's dormitory. They called him Banty Nykerk. He ran the English department, taught English, and he was good at promoting public speaking. The only vacations that I can remember when we did not have school on some day was when a Hope student won the Michigan Oratorical Contest. That was an amazing time. If a Hope College student won that Oratorical Contest, we had a day off. So we were all hoping we would. There were two of them that did while I was here in the four years. One of them was Hager, and the other one was Dykstra. I played basketball against him, class

basketball. The President's home was here, of course. Dimnent was a bachelor. He stayed there. He had two nieces who were two or three classes behind us. That was it. Graves, Van Raalte, Van Vleck, Voorhees, and Carnegie Gymnasium. Then scattered around out on the northeast corner were three wooden buildings that were society buildings. They had societies in those days. I was one of the charter members of the Emersonian Society. That was the only social activity we had. Every Friday night, we had our society meeting. Each society had a room in one of those buildings. That was it. Of course, we had the gymnasium. We had the basketball there and they trained there for track. Football games were played down by the old waterworks.

BW: Was Schouten coach at that time?

JN: Yes, Schouten was coach of all sports.

BW: His daughter is our neighbor. Beth Schouten.

JN: Oh yes, Jack Schouten.

BW: I read somewhere that there was some tension between Godfrey and Patterson in biology. Is that true?

JN: I think that probably was, of course we weren't too much informed on that. But there was. I don't know whether it was because they both were about the only doctors on the faculty and both in science. He evidently had a better preparation in biochemistry than Godfrey did, and that's why some of our students who wanted biochemistry took it under Patterson.

BW: Patterson worked as a night watchman too, for part of his teaching career, and it led

to ill health. There seemed to be a dispute between the two. Was Evans there yet?

JN: Evans taught physics, yes.

BW: Were the sciences pretty important at that time?

JN: We thought that physics was rather weak, but Patterson was very good. Again, students were his laboratory assistants. We didn't have assistant professors or instructors. Everybody was a professor. As soon as they got on the staff, they were professor so and so. So I don't think they had gradation in the faculty according to rank. Dimment and Nykerk ran the outfit. Mrs. Durfee was the Dean of Women. That was it.

BW: What were most of the students there to study? Was science what a lot of people came for at the time?

JN: Most of the men were still classical, getting ready for the seminary. The main function of Hope College originally at that time was to prepare preachers to send them on to seminary. So most of them were that. Even under those conditions, it's amazing how chemistry and biology emerged out of that in the nonclassical field, that is, science and religion didn't match too well back in those days. They still were able to establish good reputations in those fields rather than the classical. Then, of course, they also did have the education department that turned out teachers. Most of them were teachers and preachers in their preparation. We had the annual sophomore/freshmen pull. Do they still have that?

BW: Yes, over the Black River.

JN: Black River, yes.

BW: Did you have Lampen for math?

JN: Mathematics.

BW: That was early in his career too.

JN: I had Wichers in history. I wanted to take a course under Dimnent in economics, but I never did get to it. That was Dimnent's major.

BW: I suppose that's about it.

JN: Well, thank you.