



John E. McKeen

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1903-1978

By Ernst Weber

John E. McKeen, innovative chemical engineer whose great achievements for the benefit of mankind are known world wide, but who remained unassuming and warm-hearted, died in West Palm Beach, on February 25, 1978. His name has become inseparable from mass production of antibiotics, the "miracle" healer of infectious disease.

Born in New York City on June 4, 1903, Dr. McKeen was educated at the St. John's Preparatory School in Brooklyn and received his degree of Chemical Engineer in 1926 from Polytechnic Institute of Brooklyn. Upon graduation, he joined Charles Pfizer and Company, Inc., in Brooklyn, as a "painter," became successively Control Chemist, Process Development Engineer, Assistant Department Head, and in 1935 Head of one of the manufacturing departments in the Brooklyn plant. He spent 1936-37 in England to assist in the design and construction of a fermentation plant in London utilizing a new citric acid process (Kemball, Bishop Company). Returning to New York, in 1938 he became Assistant Superintendent of Pfizer's Brooklyn plant and took charge of the development of a process for the manufacture of riboflavin; he also supervised the design and construction of the plant.

During the early World War II days, an urgent need developed for mass production of penicillin, and in 1941 Dr. McKeen set up a pilot plant for laboratory production of penicillin. Because of his success, in 1942 he was made its Superintendent of the Brooklyn

plant and put in charge of the scale-up of the pilot process for large-scale production of penicillin. This he achieved in record time, supplying a large percentage of this needed "miracle antibiotic" to the armed forces. In recognition of his contributions to the growth and success of the Pfizer Company, in 1944 he was elected to the Board of Directors and in 1945 became Vice-President and Member of the Executive Committee.

After the end of World War II, in addition to his continuing activities in fermentation, he took charge of manufacture of citric acid and in 1947 directed the construction of a large production unit at the new Pfizer plant in Groton, Connecticut. He guided also the expansion of this Groton plant and participated in the planning and design of new facilities for the production of penicillin, terramycin, streptomycin, and other antibiotics, as well as a number of vitamin products. In 1948 he was assigned to convert a Government-built chemical warfare plant at Terre Haute, Indiana, into a plant for production of streptomycin; in fact, this plant furnishes today a large portion of all the streptomycin used throughout the world. In December 1948 he was made Executive Vice-President and on September 27, 1949, he was elected President of Charles Pfizer and Company. On December 14, 1950, he also became Chairman of the Board. He held the two posts until May 3, 1965, but continued as Chairman of the Board until April 29, 1968, when the Board made him Honorary Chairman, a newly created position in Dr. McKeen's honor.

Between 1950 and his retirement, the company expanded worldwide, with subsidiaries in many countries, which required worldwide travel almost annually. Dr. McKeen's marvelous personality gained him friends everywhere, and he was honored by many nations:

Order of Vasco Nunez de Balboa, Panama (July 1, 1953)

Annual Good Will Award, Filipino Youth Organization of New York (November 21, 1953)

Grand Cross and Ribbon of the Order of Honor and Merit, Cuban Red Cross, Havana, Cuba (March 4, 1954)

Order of Merit of Bernardo O'Higgins, Santiago, Chile (October, 1954)
Citizen of Quito, Ecuador, by Society of Quitenos (November, 1954)
French Legion of Honor, "Chevalier," Paris, France (June 9, 1955)
Silver Medal, Hellenic Red Cross, Athens, Greece (July 8, 1955)
Knight of St. Gregory, Rome, Italy (November, 1955)
Medaille d'Or de Leopold Ier, Royal Academy of Medicine, Brussels, Belgium (June 15, 1956)

Dr. McKeen also was a member of many professional and honorary organizations, such as the American Chemical Society since 1926, the American Institute of Chemists since 1937, the American Institute of Chemical Engineers since 1940, Sigma Xi since 1943, the New York Academy of Sciences since 1950, and others.

He presented many papers before these professional societies, in particular "The Production of Penicillin" in 1944 before the American Institute of Chemical Engineers in St. Louis, Missouri; "Contributions of the Pharmaceutical Industry to Medical Science" in 1959 before the P.M.A. Research and Development Section at White Sulphur Springs, and "The Search for New Antibiotic Substances," in 1962, published in the *Journal of the Indiana State Medical Association*, Vol. 55, No. 3, pp. 348-356.

As a result of the research and development activities during World War II, Polytechnic Institute of Brooklyn had founded the Polytechnic Research and Development Company, Inc., in February 1944, which it continued to own and operate until it was purchased by the Harris-Intertype Company in Cleveland, Ohio, in December, 1959. Dr. McKeen served as Member of a small Board of Directors from June 16, 1947, until its sale and gave freely advice and counsel on the basis of his own invaluable experience.

Dr. McKeen was elected to the National Academy of Engineering at the first membership election in 1965 and has served as Member of the Audit Committee, 1966-67; of the Committee on Gifts and Endowments, 1966-69; and of the Ad Hoc Committee to Determine the Feasibility of Providing Advisory Services in the Field of

Engineering in Medicine and Biology, 1966-67. He also served as representative of the National Academy of Engineering on the Division of Engineering, 1965-67, and on the Subpanel on Chemical Resources of the Committee on Ocean Engineering, 1966-69, both in the National Research Council.

His alma mater, the Polytechnic Institute of Brooklyn, awarded him the honorary degree Doctor of Engineering in June 1951. Because of his heavy commitments to the company, he could not accept serving on the Institute's Board of Trustees until October 1956. When he accepted, however, he was meticulous in attending Board meetings whenever in town and in participating on committees, such as the Patents, the Funds and Investments, the Development, and the Executive committees. He served as Vice-Chairman of the Board of Trustees from 1966 to 1969, when he found it necessary to relinquish further obligations, having moved to Palm Beach for the greater part of the academic year.

Dr. McKeen was also actively engaged on the Board of Directors of many civic organizations, in particular the American Foundation for Pharmaceutical Education, 1959-70; Health Information Foundation, 1950-60; World Medical Association, 1951-57; and World Rehabilitation Fund, Inc., 1958-63. Everywhere he left an indelible impression of friendly assistance when necessary, of counsel, where advisable, and of active participation when time permitted.

In all his activities and many of his travels, John E. McKeen had a valued, trusting, and dedicated companion in his wife, Noreen F. Condon; they were married on July 3, 1927, and thus shared the full and rich rewards, as well as burdens, of a most successful life.

