



Alb Correy

HARRY W. COOVER, JR.

1917–2011

Elected in 1983

“For significant contributions in widely diverse fields of applied chemistry, management of industrial research, engineering and development, and national research activities.”

BY VINCENT EDGAR PAUL
SUBMITTED BY THE NAE HOME SECRETARY

HARRY W. COOVER, JR., one of the most prolific 20th-century innovators in the chemical industry and former vice president for research at Eastman Kodak, Chemicals Division, died on March 26, 2011, at the age of 94 of heart failure.

Harry was born in Newark, Delaware, on March 6, 1917. At age 16 the car he was driving was struck by a train on a railroad crossing. He survived a coma that lasted 6 weeks. Nursed back to health by two devoted sisters, he emerged as a budding scholar. He was tutored by an aunt and ultimately passed the New York Regents Exam. Hobart College was his choice for undergraduate study. There he came under the tutelage of the late Dr. Ralph Bullard, professor of chemistry. Contemplating a career in medicine, he instead chose to focus on chemical science. He earned his B.S. at Hobart, winning the Southerland Prize. He later completed an M.S. and a Ph.D. in chemistry at Cornell University. His doctoral dissertation was on a commercial synthesis for vitamin B6.

Soon after, turning down a position at DuPont, Harry joined Eastman Kodak as a research associate and was soon transferred to the Tennessee Eastman Company in Kingsport, Tennessee—and thus evolved the research arm of the Kodak Chemical Division. He quickly rose through the ranks to

become research director and later executive vice president for development.

Harry concentrated his efforts on polymers, contributing methods for the use of catalysts in their synthesis and graft polymerization, and also plastics, textiles, and insecticides. Later he worked on cyanoacrylate adhesives, now known as “superglues.” Originally, work on these compounds was directed toward their possible use as plastics for impact-resistant jet canopies and as optically perfect gun sites for the military.

Famously, a lab associate inadvertently stuck together the lenses of an expensive refractometer, thus ruining the device. This was the “lightbulb” moment. Harry always said it was “one moment of serendipity and 10 years of hard work.” Afterward, in a moment of television history, Harry and TV host Garry Moore hung from a device joined by one drop of superglue on the show “I’ve Got a Secret.”

Ultimately, Harry was awarded more than 460 U.S. patents and became a champion for innovation and applied research. One of his passionate ideas was to engage the entire company in the research process. This he called “Programmed Innovation.” Under his direction, an example of this process resulted in a method for the gasification of coal. Even after retirement, Harry’s zeal landed him positions as a consultant for new product development at Loctite Corporation and the Reilly and Lilly chemical companies.

Numerous awards during his career included the Southern Chemist Award and the Gold Medal of the Industrial Research Institute, of which he was later elected president. In 2004 he was inducted into the Inventors Hall of Fame in Akron, Ohio. In 2010 he was awarded the National Medal of Technology and Innovation at the White House by President Obama.

Harry’s last philanthropic act was to create a lovely multiuse memorial dome in memory of his wife of over 60 years, Muriel Zumbach Coover, on the grounds of the Allendale Mansion in Kingsport, Tennessee. He also endowed a grant for the development of an outdoor pavilion for the arts at the same site.

An iconic figure of industry and science, Harry W. Coover epitomized the polished gentleman. A world traveler, he represented America as the best of sophisticated life and accomplishment. His example is revered by his family and all who knew him. Dr. Coover is survived by his sons Harry Wesley Coover III and Stephen Rohm Coover; daughter Melinda Coover Paul; and four grandchildren—Brett Coover, Dana Coover, Adam Paul, and Kirsten Paul.