

# Wisconsin is Home to Pharmacy History

American Institute of the History of Pharmacy is center for historical research and information

by Gregory J. Higby, PhD, RPh

“**W**hat was the location of the first drugstore in the United States,” asked the assistant producer from the Millionaire television show. “Everybody I called said I should contact you guys up in Madison.”

Since 1941, the American Institute of the History of Pharmacy (AIHP) has been answering such questions posed by researchers, journalists, students, movie directors, teachers, and yes, TV shows. For most pharmacists, two other questions come to mind: “What is the American Institute of the History of Pharmacy and why is it in Madison?”

Like the Millionaire question, the short answer is simple and the full answer much more complicated. In essence, the Institute serves as the historical society for American pharmacy. Soon after its founding in January 1941 at the UW School of Pharmacy as a center for historical research and information, the Institute evolved into a not-for-profit membership organization while retaining its original mission. The result is a complex institution that belies its small presence in a few rooms in Rennebohm Hall.

The Institute mirrors the profession it serves. Most people who interact with

pharmacy only see the container of medicine they receive. They have little idea what else happens in the workings of a pharmacy. Most members of the Institute enjoy receiving its regular publications — *Pharmacy in History*, *Apothecary’s Cabinet*, and historical calendar — without realizing what else goes on in Madison.

## RESEARCH CENTER DEVELOPMENT

The Institute was founded mainly through the efforts of two remarkable pharmacists. The first, Edward Kremers (1865-1941), had been the head of Wisconsin’s pharmacy program and a national professional figure for decades before his retirement in 1935. In addition to his work as a scientist and educator, Kremers built the historical resources at UW necessary for serious research and writing. His own list of historical publications is impressive. More importantly, in 1939, he encouraged George Urdang (1882-1960) to come to Madison to write a comprehensive history textbook. A refugee from Hitler’s Germany, Urdang was a trained and internationally respected historian.

Together they combined to author the classic text, *Kremers and Urdang’s History of Pharmacy* (Lippincott, 1940).

The combination of resources, the University’s long commitment to the field of the history of pharmacy fostered by Kremers, and the presence of Urdang, led to the Institute’s founding soon thereafter. Since then, the AIHP has worked consistently to keep Madison the center for pharmacohistorical resources in North America. The UW has done its part by



Edward Kremers, retired head of the UW pharmacy program, about the time that AIHP was founded.

maintaining its book and journal collections in the field. Of special note is the arrangement made by the Institute and the Wisconsin Historical Society in 1970 to preserve manuscripts connected to pharmacy’s past. Hundreds of archive boxes hold records of the United States Pharmacopeia, the American College of Apothecaries, and the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy, plus other national institutions. Prominent figures in

THE UNIVERSITY’S MAIN COMPUTER CATALOG IS MAD-CAT  
[WWW.LIBRARY.WISC.EDU](http://WWW.LIBRARY.WISC.EDU)

pharmacy such as Robert Fischelis, Rufus Lyman, and Don Francke have papers in the AIHP collections. The Institute is now cooperating with the Historical Society to digitize some documents and photographs on a new history of pharmacy Web page to debut this fall.

FOR A COMPLETE LISTING IN THE AIHP COLLECTION SEE  
[HTTP://ARCAT.LIBRARY.WISC.EDU](http://ARCAT.LIBRARY.WISC.EDU)

On a nationwide basis, the Institute cooperates with libraries and museums to preserve collections and improve historical resources at other locations. For example, a college of pharmacy recently decided to discard its back runs of journals. Rather than having these tossed into a landfill, the Institute office coordinated an effort to find homes for these old titles in other libraries. All the volumes were saved. In a project to help build reference holdings, the AIHP and University Microfilms International (UMI) produced a microform collection of over 90 books called “Primary Sources for the History of Pharmacy in the United States.” By purchasing the set of 396 microfiche, a library would have a core of valuable historical references.



For many years, Arthur Uhl, Dean of the UW School of Pharmacy, served as chairman of the Institute board. Here he is seated between Glenn Sonnedecker (l) and John Parascandola (r), c. 1970.

## PUBLISHER

As a guide to the UMI collection, the Institute published *A Selection of Primary Sources for the History of Pharmacy in the United States: Books and Trade Catalogs from the Colonial Period to 1940*, by Nydia M. King. Since 1941, AIHP had produced more than 120 quarterly issues of *Pharmacy in History*, scores of pamphlets and brochures, plus a series of small books covering a wide variety of historical topics. As part of its broader humanistic mission, the Institute publishes two books in ethics, *Ethical Responsibility in Pharmacy Practice* and *Ethical Practice in Pharmacy: A Guidebook for Technicians*. The recent book, *Drugstore Memories: American Pharmacists Recall Life Behind the Counter, 1824–1933*, received especially good reviews. As a publisher, AIHP has worked with several other pharmacy organizations including APhA, AACP, NABP, and USP on projects.



George Urdang, the first Institute director, behind his desk in the late 1940s.

## HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Publications also serve as a connection between the Madison office and the worldwide membership of AIHP. For 40 years, the primary conduit has been *Pharmacy in History*, which contains a combination of peer-reviewed articles by scholars, news notes, book reviews and organizational information. Each year, issue No. 4 holds a proceedings of the annual meeting, held in conjunction with APhA. As with all societies, annual meetings bring together active members to network, socialize, and

share their findings in paper sessions. In Seattle this year, 17 papers covered topics as diverse as therapeutics in first-century Rome and quinine supply in the American Civil War. Also in Seattle, the Institute presented its Edward Kremers Award for pharmaco-historical writing by an American to Wisconsin alumnus Robert A. Buerki. AIHP also awards the George Urdang Medal for writing of the highest quality internationally and certificates of commendation for state or local history projects.

Often these papers and projects begin with calls to Madison. Like the fellow from the Millionaire show, people want quick and detailed answers. Sometimes AIHP staff can look things up in a matter of minutes or point directly to a Web site. Usually, a return call or e-mail is needed after a search through reference books or the Kremers Reference Files. Generally, queries from members are answered without charge as are those from scholars. When questions come from commercial sources, small research fees are sometimes applied. Most importantly, the knowledgeable AIHP staff sometimes refers callers to other experts in specific areas of pharmaceutical history.

## PARTNERSHIP WITH THE SCHOOL OF PHARMACY

Many people with historical questions contact the UW School of Pharmacy not knowing of the Institute's existence. Madison has had a nationwide reputation in historical pharmacy for over a century.

The efforts of the Institute and the School's history of pharmacy program have been linked for more than 50 years. All five directors of the Institute — Urdang, Sonnedecker, Parascandola, Scarborough and Higby — have been faculty members of the School of Pharmacy, teaching future pharmacists about the past.

The School and the Institute have cooperated on innumerable projects during the last 63 years. The most significant of these may be the truly unique collection of resources known as the Kremers Reference Files (KRF). To write his history book, Edward Kremers began in the 1890s to gather materials e.g., articles, reprints, photographs, catalogs, and manuscripts. Today, the KRF is part of the Institute's suite of rooms and contains a topical file collection in over 700 drawers, shelves of catalogs and references, and cases of artifacts. Together the School and Institute maintain and build this priceless resource. In April 2004, a dozen researchers, including two from overseas, visited the KRF hoping to find historical information lacking elsewhere. None left empty handed. One commented, "This is truly the Mecca of the history of pharmacy!"

## CONCLUSION

This just scratches the surface of the work of the Institute and its place in the life of the UW campus and the world of pharmacy. Every year pharmacists from around Wisconsin visit Rennebohm Hall and view the exhibits put up by the Institute. Some donate artifacts or other materials to the School, which are processed by the Institute staff. And finally, other pharmacists decide to support the Institute's work by joining as members.

Oh, and the answer to that question about the first drugstore in the United States? It's still open to debate, but the answer may well reside in the marvelous history of pharmacy collections within the Institute. ●



## TEACHING

A large reason for the AIHP's publishing program is to provide materials for teaching history. Other popular titles for courses, in addition to a reprint edition of *History of Pharmacy*, include *Folklore and Folk Medicines*, *Inside Story of Medicines*, and *Pill Peddlers: Essays on the History of Pharmaceutical Industry*. AIHP slide-talks on a variety of topics assist instructors as well. Of late, the *Teaching the History & Social Aspects of Pharmacy* newsletter has been revived as an online forum for instructors. Lastly, in 2000 the AIHP endeavored to reach a large student audience through a popular history newsletter called *Apothecary's Cabinet*. Each issue is sent to more than 50 colleges of pharmacy for distribution to roughly 10,000 pharmacy students nationwide. Back issues are available at [www.aihp.org](http://www.aihp.org).



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