Remembering
Harry Wasserman
Vol. 2

Please send any memories/photos you would like to share to j.mcbride@yale.edu

(If you’ve sent something that isn’t already here, please remind me. Things are a bit disorganized.)
I met Harry Wasserman in Berlin at the Technical University where he had been invited to speak on invitation from Prof. Ferdinand Bohlmann in the Spring of 1968. At that time I was finishing my doctorate about indolalkaloids with Dr. Ekkehard Winterfeldt. On that occasion he invited me to work with him as a post-doc student in the Sterling Department at Yale.

In the fall of 1968 my pregnant wife Karin and I arrived in New York by ship, the USS United States, coming from Rotterdam and were welcomed by Harry himself who helped us store the mattress we had brought with us all the way from Berlin until we could find a place to stay in New Haven. It turned out to be Mansfield street close to the ice skating rink. Our first child George Friedrich was born in Dec. in the university hospital. At that time there was a restaurant in New Haven called "George and Harry’s", and when our 4th child, a son, was born in 1975, he was named Harry Vincent.

I worked in a research group with photo synthesis on the Reaction of Singlet Oxygen with Thiophenes, a paper which was received in USA on the 22. December 1969 and received for publication in the UK on the 26. January 1970. It was a very inspiring research department with students from all over the world like Yew Chang from Vancouver, Canada, Phil Zoretic, an American, and many other wonderful persons who enjoyed Harry’s teaching of organic chemistry.

After working in the pharmaceutical industry, first at Merck in Darmstadt and then at Byk Gulden in Konstanz, I did a 180° change of profession and became an alternative healer doing the medicine, nutrition and life style (spirituality) following the teachings of Hildegard of Bingen. In my practise here in Southern Germany many patients come looking for new ways of healing. To date 3 books have been published in America: Hildegard of Bingen’s medicine, Hildegard of Bingen’s Spiritual Remedies and the e-book
Giggling with Harry

Some time in the 1970s a classical German Herr Professor visited the department for a day. He had the normal schedule of discussions with individual faculty members preceding his late afternoon seminar presentation. His last call was with Harry.

On my way to the seminar I ran into Harry, who described how, when he had begun to discuss his group’s recent results, he had noticed that his guest was restive. Asked if there was some problem, the Professor confided that he needed to put some information on the blackboard before the seminar was to begin an hour later. No problem. Harry suggested that he prepare the board first then return to the office to enjoy Harry’s research at leisure, and led him to the vacant seminar room.

The first portent of trouble appeared when the Professor opened his briefcase and began laying out his tools – a straight edge, a measuring tape, a variety of colored chalk. After cleaning the board Harry left the Professor to his work and returned to his office.

Fifteen minutes later Harry returned to find that one of the blackboards had been laid out in a precise grid. When he returned after another fifteen minutes the axes of an NMR spectrum had been entered and labeled neatly with delta values, and the Professor had started entering spectral peaks. On his next return the Professor was finishing by creating realistic baseline noise. By now the audience was beginning to filter in for coffee and cookies and engaging the Professor in conversation. Harry returned to his office to fetch a notebook.

As Harry, the connoisseur of human nature, described this situation to me quietly before the seminar he seemed more amused, perhaps bemused, than offended.

Harry and I sat silently next to one another as the Professor was introduced, but then he began his presentation by thanking the Yale faculty for the invitation and for telling him during the day about their fascinating recent results. I felt Harry’s elbow shaking against mine. He felt mine shaking against his. I think we managed, but only barely, to stifle audible giggles, but we had to look down and cover our faces. There were a number of subsequent minutes of intermittent vibrations and eyes fixed forward before we regained our composure.

Harry’s Story about Martin Edlinger and Louis Fieser

(related Jan 17, 2003)

During his thesis defence Martin Edlinger was asked by Louis Fieser to list the various reagents that could be used to reduce a ketone to an alcohol.

Edlinger rattled off a list of a wide variety of reagents, but when he was finished Fieser asked, “What about catalytic hydrogenation?”

“I thought you knew about that one,” Edlinger replied.
Working with Professor Wasserman towards the end of the time he spent at Yale involved me in a number of unusual tasks. By the use of the word unusual I want to signal that these tasks were atypical for a chemist, not that they were atypical for everyone and I do want to stress that sometimes what Professor Wasserman got up to was much more atypical than what he expected of me.

This particular episode grew out of an activity that was very common for us. He had a very keen eye for design and for the representation of reactions and chemical structures, such that one almost spent as much time making the figures as one did making the molecule. These design processes might begin with freehand drawings or ChemDraw or original spectra but they always ended the same way – at the photocopier. Positioning the figure on the pages was important, he took it very seriously and the photocopier was his favourite tool when arranging artwork on the page.

This particular early spring day we were there with the photocopier under the dormer window in the outer office, always Mary-Lou’s office even though by this time she was an occasional visitor rather than a full-time assistant. Once we had completed the scheme we were working on, he happened to glance out of the window and he saw on the narrow and shallow rain-gutter outside a dead robin.

‘Look at that’ he said. ‘It’s sad but it is a sign of spring none the less. The migration is very tough on the birds, some of them die along the way and some die not long after they arrive.’

We contemplated the dead bird for a few seconds and he said:

‘I think it would be upsetting for Mary-Lou to see that – we should move it.’

This seemed very reasonable, so I started to cast around the room for something we could use in the way of a tool. I distinctly remember asking him whether there was a broom or a yardstick or something like that. This exercise of first looking and then asking cannot have taken more than a few seconds, but when I turned again I saw the back end of a distinguished member of the National Academy disappearing out of the window in his stocking feet. To this day I have no idea why he took his shoes off, but take then off he did, preparatory to stepping out onto a very narrow and slippery rain gutter that was separated from a two-story drop to Prospect Street by a parapet precisely two bricks high. I remember watching him stand there on that narrow ledge, an eighty-something year-old Professor in Yale College with a dead bird in his hand and wondering what it was that I would tell the coroner at the inquest.

He moved the bird to a sensible distance and a discreet location, he shimmied back in through the window, washed his hands, put his shoes on and never mentioned it again. To him it was as natural as the rain that the bird should be removed to a more suitable location and just as natural that it should be him, not his assistant, who should undertake the task. No matter the odd situations I found myself in when working with him I was never asked to do anything that he would not do himself.
John Parr: Bombay Lectures

I read with interest the discussion of the Bombay Lectures - I have to say that my recollection of that story was a little different.

As I had it, the phrase was coined when a professor, anticipating traveling to foreign parts, arranged to trade lectures with another member of the faculty so that their classes would be covered while they were away. The traveling prof gave the classes for the one who was to stand in before the trip, but their travel plans fell through, so they ended up giving the classes for the other chap and not needing the cover. An academic pre-hatching egg-counting sort of thing.

I think that might be the charm of these stories - they are a little different every time.

Hervey Ackerman: THE ROUND UP

As a graduate student I was to observe one of Harry’s lectures. The students came in and took their seats. The appointed time arrived, but Harry didn’t. The class fidgeted. Was the unwritten rule “5 minutes for a Professor, and 10 minutes for the Head of the Department”? Whatever, the students started to leave. Fortunately the classroom was in a corner of the building overlooking the lawn. Harry arrived, and without hesitation opened a window, ran through it onto the lawn, and herded the class back in for the lecture. That’s the kind of dedication Harry had.

A fond and unique memory!

John Solodar

You asked for some Harry Wasserman stories. I can give you three.

Sometime around 1965-6 or 7, R. B. Woodward, Harry’s PhD supervisor at Harvard, came to Yale to give a lecture. Harry
got all excited and figured that Woodward would want to see
Harry’s group’s labs. Harry ran around the day before the
lecture ensuring that everything was tidied up for
Woodward. He did a lot of the tidying himself. In someone’s
lab, Harry totally destroyed a valuable piece of equipment
during this endeavor. Not too worry, just so things looked
good for Woodward’s visit. Lecture day came and went, but
R.B Woodward never made it to our labs for a visit.

In that same time period Harry had a reputation for keeping his
students longer than anyone else. In fact, in my class of
organic students everyone else had finished up and all of
Harry’s students were still around. Somewhere in here, say
1965 or 66, during the annual all-grad student
party/presentation/funfest, a song came along to take note of
this fact. Sung to the then popular tune “I’ll be seeing you” the
first few lines went: I’ll be seeing you, in 1982, when dear old
Harry’s through with me. Unfortunately I have forgotten the
rest.

One more show tune for which I remember the first two lines
sung to “Give my regards to Broadway” : Give my regards to
Harry, remember me to Elga too……..

Harry was indeed a delight to be with. My wife and I have
fond memories of our group’s occasional get-togethers at the
home of Harry and Elga.

John Solodar ‘67
Pictures from Frank Precopio

[Images of people and a laboratory with captions]

Frank Precopio in his lab at the Sterling Chemistry bldg. ca. 1960

Work party putting in lawn at Harry's new house. (?) Frank Reidel, Polly Newman, Romeo Canca

Marylin Kloody, Frank Precopio in a research green house. ca. 1960
Dr. Harry Wasserman and Dr. Frank Precopio in Franks laboratory at the GE Central Research Center 1953