

# PRESIDENT'S OPENING ADDRESS FOR THE 105<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL MEETING

THURSDAY, JUNE 18, 2009  
OGLEBAY RESORT, WHEELING WEST VIRGINIA

by  
STEPHEN S. YANEK

Good Morning Everyone, and welcome to the 105<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the American Leather Chemists Association.

I hereby declare this year's meeting open. Needless to say, it has been an interesting year to be in leather business. The truth is that, in 105 years of the ALCA's existence, our industry has always been engaged in a struggle for its survival. As you may know, I have long been interested in the progression of the American leather industry since the Civil War ended 144 years ago, and I have had the fortune to have worked for two tanneries that were founded during that same period, in 1865-66. This morning, I would like to roll back the clock briefly to the Association of 100 years ago – the 1909 ALCA convention. My grandfather, Stephen Yanek, would not be born for another 6 years, 75 miles east from here in Mammoth, PA. The ALCA president was H.T. Wilson from Dubois, PA, a subscription to JALCA cost only \$5.00, and one of the greater concerns was where to obtain a quality supply of chestnut bark. Well, as we now know, the chestnut groves would eventually be destroyed by blight (a fungal infection), competition from synthetic materials would increase exponentially, and scientists were still another 50 years away from proven knowledge of collagen structure. Nonetheless, I am sure their respective tanneries made absolutely beautiful products and no one doubted that leather was both a necessary and a highly specialized material. It was customary at that time, actually through to the 1980's, for ALCA presidents to serve a two-year term. Mr. H.T. Wilson was the president when he gave his address to the association at 10:30 AM on December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1909. The venue was the Hotel Raleigh at the corner of Pennsylvania Ave. and 11<sup>th</sup> St., N.W. in Washington, D.C.; where a single room with a bath was \$3.00, two in a room without a bath was available for the same price. In the audience were familiar names such as Alsop, Vogel, Procter, Smoot, Reed, Morrison, Wilson (J.A.), and Greene.

The speakers and subjects at this meeting included:

- F.A. Vogel, "English Methods of Tanning"
- C.A. Morrison, "Extract Tannage"
- Oma Carr, "The Future of Heavy Leather"
- R.W. Griffith, "Principles of Liming"
- C.M. Proctor, "Bleaching of Leather"
- J.E. Stevens "The Development of the Quebracho Industry"
- W.W. Stockberger, "The Production of New Tanning Materials in the United States"

Only six years earlier, the Association had been founded in the very same hotel (Hotel Raleigh, Washington), and H.C. Reed, the Secretary-Treasurer, reported that they had experienced their best attendance in Washington, D.C.<sup>1</sup> In view of the "excellent program" they had arranged, they expected a large turnout (which was ultimately about 50 people, close to what we have here today). Mr. Reed's editorial of November 1909 wrote, "In addition to the routine work on analytical methods which is of interest to our active members, many addresses by authoritative speakers have been arranged, and these addresses are to be on subjects which will be of interest to the practical tanners, leather merchants, and others represented in our associate membership. We trust that these associate members will encourage the work of the Association by their presence, and we believe that their attendance will be with profit to themselves." Mr. Reed went on to request the participation of new members, "To the younger active members...the responsibility of the future welfare of the Association is on you; older men are constantly going from the laboratory to fields of applied science, and you must take their places in the experimental work of the Association. Come to the meeting and bring papers to read before the convention.

Participate in the discussions and be really active members. Use the Journal for publishing your observations of interesting and profitable experimental work, and do all you can to fit yourselves for the time when you will be the Association.”

Does all of this sound familiar? I was fascinated by the similarities and concerns of 100 years ago versus those of today. The redundancy gives one the impression that either nothing has changed, or perhaps that we are still chasing an impossible dream. But we know that is not true. Incredible strides in science and technology have been made since 1909. Many of the technical problems we as tanners faced back then are now surmountable by modern chemical technology, machinery, process automation, and above all, education. For sure, the availability and supply of raw materials has changed as have the overall character of the products we are making. We also realize that the needs of the customers have changed as well. So what I am really saying is that we, the Association, have and will continually evolve to meet the changing needs of our customers – the customers who buy leather for the sum of its look, feel, durability, mystique, romance, and cost – which of course are the additive factors of the value equation.

As we prepare for the 105<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting, let’s remind ourselves about the power and privilege of free speech. Our words do matter, and may also be twisted and recontexted to support alternative political opinions. I recently found that PETA, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, quoted one of Dr. David Bailey’s publications on their website.<sup>2</sup> They cited his statement about the economic importance of hides and leather to the meatpacking industry to support their own anti-capitalist views and disdain for meat consumption. Most people will regard these as radical opinions or blogs that have little effect on actual commerce and governmental regulation. Fact or fiction, we cannot dispute the impact that political activist Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* had on the meat industry after it was published in 1906. As leather professionals, we must be prepared to stand up and defend the positive contributions of a modern tanning operation to the local, state, and national economies around the world.

The time is right for a fresh editorial perspective on our business as a “green” or “renewable” industry. Thousands of people are expected to receive \$500 million in “green jobs” training as part of the U.S. Government’s economic stimulus package.<sup>3</sup> Let’s use this meeting as a rallying opportunity and figure out how this could become a means for us to rebuild our own factories, create jobs, and generate profits while converting a natural resource that is unsuitable for the human food chain. I will remind you that no one chooses to pay a dollar more for anything called plastic, composite, or vinyl, unless falsely led to believe in its value through technical obfuscation and misleading product substitution.

Before we begin today with the J.A. Wilson Memorial Lecture and the 1<sup>st</sup> Technical Session, I would like to briefly touch upon some key points from Past President H.T.

Wilson’s opening address to the Annual Meeting in December 1909.<sup>4</sup> With respect to the formation and existence of the Association itself, there were “older leather chemists prophesying the speedy and complete failure of the undertaking.” Wilson noted that the “Future success of the ALCA would be determined by two factors: the recruitment of younger members and the “tanning trade in general.” He recognized the value in seeking to attract more tanners and extract manufacturers (today’s chemical and machinery suppliers) to the convention by opening up the subject matter to include non-technical and practical papers, not solely papers of a theoretical nature.

Many of the subjects important to the industry in 1909 were virtually identical to the concerns of today. In H.T. Wilson’s address, these appeared as follows:

1. Changes in tanning materials. As we know, the raw material of a tannery in the 1800’s was bark, but gradually became bark extract. “A few years hence, and very few at that, the bark stack, which has been the heart of the tannery, will be a memory, and will be seen only in photographs.” Technical people would be required to maintain the tannery operation as new materials took the place of old.
2. The global hide market. Cattle ranges in Texas and the Southwest were being converted to cotton plantations and smaller farms, “which yield quicker and more remunerative returns.” He saw a “curtailment in the domestic supply of raw material”, which would inevitably necessitate hide imports.
3. Cost of manufacturing and materials. “The world must continue to have leather,...but, owing to the ever increasing cost of all raw materials, ways, and means must be found whereby leather, good leather, may be produced at a minimum cost.”
4. Location, location, location. Cites leather manufacture as the third largest enterprise in the country; the movement away from “tall timber” locations to ones that make commercial sense for supply and demand. Geographical changes would necessitate the technical person more than ever, as we see today with the movement of our industry around the world.
5. Cost of attending the conventions. “Some of the active members have not attended the (Annual Meeting) for many years, simply because their employers have not seen fit to advance the necessary funds for the trip, which, in reality, would bring them ample returns,

since the services of the chemist would be more efficient were he at liberty to mingle with his colleagues, and exchange ideas with them.”

6. Content of the Journal and of the Annual Meeting technical sessions. Raises the possibility of publishing non-technical information at no detriment to JALCA’s quality.

H.T. Wilson closed his 1909 address by saying, “The final success of any undertaking is simply a matter of individual patience and endeavor. Genius is only infinite patience, so hang onto your patience.”

My friends, in the words spoken 100 years ago by H.T. Wilson, I ask you to “hang onto your patience” as we weather these difficult economic times. Receive the information donated by these presenters as an investment in your own education for the benefit of your employer or your enterprise. Interact with your colleagues during the questions & answer sessions, coffee breaks, meals, and social events that we have planned for you. Use your new found knowledge to invent new leather products, and to develop new markets for its by-products. Cultivate a fresh perspective of leather as a premium material, and begin building the leather business of the future, today.

On this note, it is now my pleasure to introduce to you today the John Arthur Wilson Memorial Lecturer, Dr. Eleanor M. Brown.

## REFERENCES

1. Reed, H.C., *JALCA*, Vol. IV, No. 11 (November 1909), pages 269-271.
2. www.PETA.org, Fact Sheet entitled, “Leather: Animals Abused and Killed for their Skins”, citing Dr. David G. Bailey, “*Gamma Radiation Preservation of Cattle Hides: A New Twist on an Old Story*” (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Agriculture Agricultural Research Service, 18 Dec. 1998).
3. Fender, Jessica, The Denver Post / DenverPost.com, “\$500 million in green jobs training announced at Biden event”, May 26, 2009.
4. Wilson, H.T., *JALCA*, Vol. V, No.1, (January 1910), pages 6-14.

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# INTRODUCTION OF THE JOHN ARTHUR WILSON MEMORIAL LECTURE

*by*  
STEPHEN S. YANEK

Dr. Eleanor M. Brown is a Research Chemist and Lead Scientist at the Eastern Regional Research Center, Agricultural Research Service, United States Department of Agriculture. She is a native of East Liverpool, Ohio, and currently lives with her husband in Oreland, PA. She holds a BA in mathematics and chemistry from Ohio Wesleyan University, and a Ph.D. from Drexel University in Chemistry with an emphasis on the application of physical chemistry to biological problems. Her research career has been with the ERRC, ARS, USDA. Since 1971, she has studied protein structure in a variety of agriculturally important systems (dairy, poultry, and leather) to achieve knowledge of the relationships between structure and biological or technological function. She has studied the effects of chemical and enzymatic modifications as well as interactions with environmental variables and other biomolecules on protein structure-function relationships in basic and applied contexts. She is author or coauthor of 125 publications and 4 patents and has presented 45 papers at scientific meetings.

Since 1990, she has been Lead Scientist for projects designed to reduce the environmental impact of leather production and develop a basis for understanding the mechanisms of tanning. Studies of the relationship between protein (collagen) structure and function, particularly in a processing system, form the core of her research. Academic scientists from the USA, UK, China and Spain have obtained their own funding to support their research in her laboratory on the biochemical fundamentals of tanning.

She has been a member of the American Leather Chemists Association since 1991, serving as a member and chair of the Uses of Collagen and Its Coproducts Committee, a member of the Editorial Board of JALCA and a member of Council (2005-2008). She received the prize paper award in 1993 and the Alsop award in 1996.

Ladies and Gentlemen, please give a warm round of applause for this year's J.A. Wilson Memorial Lecturer, Dr. Eleanor Brown.

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